

## Book Review

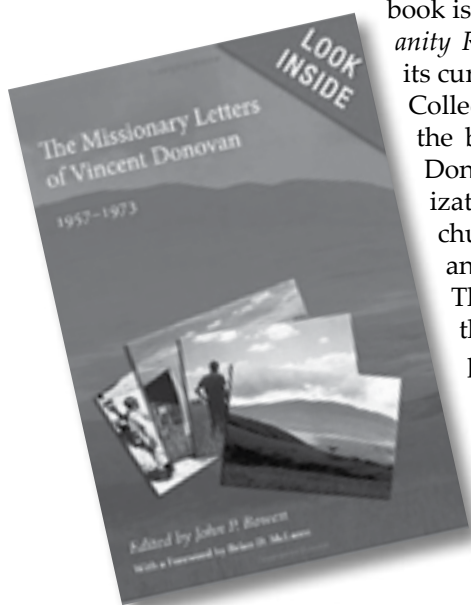
BRUCE CAMPBELL MOYER

Bowen, John P. 2011.  
*The Missionary Letters of Vincent Donovan, 1957-1973*.  
Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications.  
234 pp. US\$28

Most missiologists are familiar with Vincent Donovan of Tanzania and his book *Christianity Rediscovered*. Recently I discovered a companion book, *The Letters of Vincent Donovan*. This is an equally important contribution to the discussion of church planting and contextualization, for in this book is found the background to *Christianity Rediscovered* and an intimation of its current trajectory.

Collected in chronological order, the book shows the development of Donovan's theology of contextualization, his struggles with the larger church and church administrators, and even a few of his colleagues. These letters put his ministry in the larger context of East African politics as the nation of Tanganyika (now Tanzania) was birthing and Vatican II was struggling as a church coming of age.

Donovan was a distant disciple of Roland Allen, a Protestant missiologist. He grasped the need to strip away all the



extra, historical accretions that had bound themselves to his church as barnacles on a ship's hull. He was determined to share with his African friends the very simplest forms of Christianity, forms that they could perpetuate in their own communities, forms that could be expressed in their languages, clothed with their garments, a form of the faith that would be more theirs than Rome's.

Many would say that it was a nice dream, but an exercise in futility. As his colleagues admit, in the final chapter, Donovan was a charismatic visionary and an idealist. They also admitted that the experiment was worthwhile, even if it did not all work out. Lives were changed, dreams were realized, and some of it remains.

On one level contextualized church planting is the ancient struggle between prophet and priest, between church as movement and church as comforter, between visionaries and administrators, between those who seek stability and those who follow a vision. What is versus what might be.

Ecclesiologists will benefit from this book by its insight into missiological thinking. Pastors will appreciate Donovan's sometime effective struggles to separate evangelism from pastoral responsibilities. Administrators will benefit from the insights into a visionary mind. For those with a need to place the book in a genre, think Leslie Newbiggen, and Brian McClaren.

An appropriate warning from the editor is worth noting: "Take Donovan's book as a parable, not as a manual. If you try to follow *Christianity Rediscovered* as a textbook or a manual of missiology, then you're going to be trapped. It was good for one time, one place and one person" (221).

Reading the book is also a spiritual exercise, a devotional experience.